



AMVETS WEEKLY LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

SEPTEMBER 16, 2019

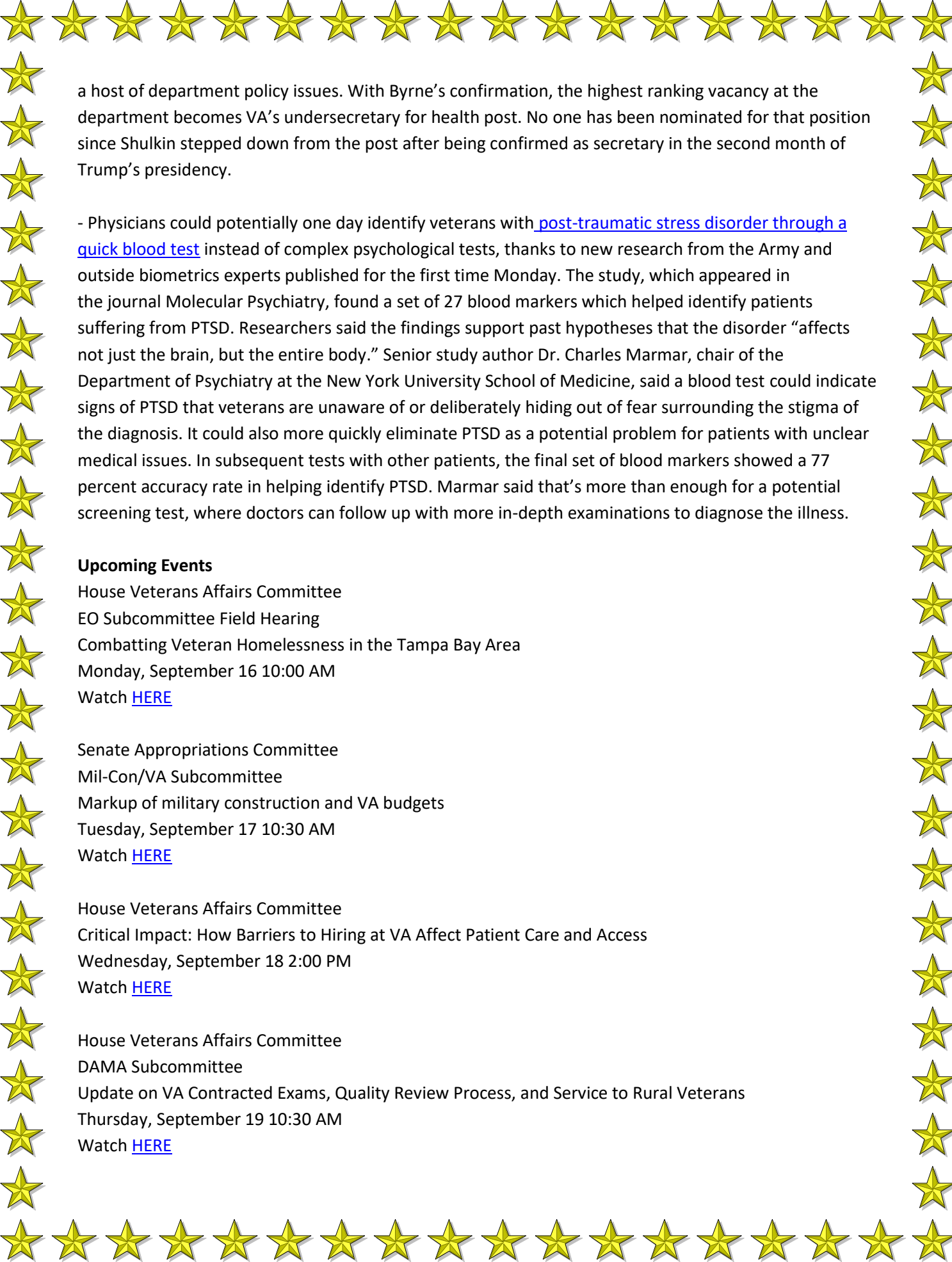
News Driving the Week

- VA Secretary Robert Wilkie last week encouraged House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to pass bipartisan legislation to [help VA build partnerships with community groups](#) who can offer direct help to Veterans who are at risk of harming themselves. The IMPROVE Well-Being for Veterans Act, from Reps. Jack Bergman (R-Mich.) and Chrissy Houlahan (D-Pa.) would allow VA to direct grant funding to these groups across the country. These community-based groups would be able to use that funding to identify Veterans who pose a suicide risk. “H.R. 3495 is one-way Members of Congress from both parties can support Veterans and their local communities, and I believe it can be the beginning this year of a longer-term collaboration with the VA to get at the root causes of the suicide crisis in the nation,” Wilkie wrote to Pelosi in a letter last week. “I hope your caucus can support this bipartisan effort.”

- The Department of Veterans Affairs must [reimburse veterans for emergency medical care at non-VA facilities](#), a federal appeals court ruled Monday — a decision that could be worth billions of dollars to veterans. The U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims said the VA has been wrongfully denying reimbursement to veterans who sought emergency medical care at non-VA facilities, and struck down an internal VA regulation that blocked those payments. Plaintiffs' lawyers say that based on past estimates by the VA, the department is now on the hook for between \$1.8 billion and \$6.5 billion in reimbursements to hundreds of thousands of veterans who have filed or will file claims between 2016 and 2025.

- House lawmakers considered legislation Wednesday that would [eliminate copayments for female veterans when they receive their birth control](#) through the Department of Veterans Affairs — extending them the same benefit available to most women through public and private insurers. The Equal Access to Contraception for Veterans Act would do away with copayments for birth control, saving female veterans a total of \$400,000 each year, according to VA estimates. It was introduced by Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., the leader of the new Women Veterans Task Force. Teresa Boyd, an assistant deputy undersecretary at the VA, said the agency supported the legislation, but stipulated that Congress must appropriate enough money to cover the cost.

- Senate [lawmakers confirmed James Byrne](#) for the second-highest post at the Department of Veterans Affairs, officially filling a key leadership vacancy after an absence of more than a year. Byrne, a former Marine infantry officer who previously served as VA's general counsel, was approved for the post by a 81-11 vote. His nomination has been pending since April, but he has been serving in the post as acting director since August 2018. The VA deputy secretary post has been open since Thomas Bowman retired from the job in June 2018. Bowman had been passed over for the acting VA secretary job twice after the firing of former VA Secretary David Shulkin, and reportedly had fought with White House operatives on



a host of department policy issues. With Byrne's confirmation, the highest ranking vacancy at the department becomes VA's undersecretary for health post. No one has been nominated for that position since Shulkin stepped down from the post after being confirmed as secretary in the second month of Trump's presidency.

- Physicians could potentially one day identify veterans with [post-traumatic stress disorder through a quick blood test](#) instead of complex psychological tests, thanks to new research from the Army and outside biometrics experts published for the first time Monday. The study, which appeared in the journal Molecular Psychiatry, found a set of 27 blood markers which helped identify patients suffering from PTSD. Researchers said the findings support past hypotheses that the disorder "affects not just the brain, but the entire body." Senior study author Dr. Charles Marmar, chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine, said a blood test could indicate signs of PTSD that veterans are unaware of or deliberately hiding out of fear surrounding the stigma of the diagnosis. It could also more quickly eliminate PTSD as a potential problem for patients with unclear medical issues. In subsequent tests with other patients, the final set of blood markers showed a 77 percent accuracy rate in helping identify PTSD. Marmar said that's more than enough for a potential screening test, where doctors can follow up with more in-depth examinations to diagnose the illness.

Upcoming Events

House Veterans Affairs Committee
EO Subcommittee Field Hearing
Combatting Veteran Homelessness in the Tampa Bay Area
Monday, September 16 10:00 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

Senate Appropriations Committee
Mil-Con/VA Subcommittee
Markup of military construction and VA budgets
Tuesday, September 17 10:30 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee
Critical Impact: How Barriers to Hiring at VA Affect Patient Care and Access
Wednesday, September 18 2:00 PM
Watch [HERE](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee
DAMA Subcommittee
Update on VA Contracted Exams, Quality Review Process, and Service to Rural Veterans
Thursday, September 19 10:30 AM
Watch [HERE](#)

House Veterans Affairs Committee
OI Subcommittee
Examining VA's Over-payments and Collection Processes
Thursday, September 19 2:00 PM
Watch [HERE](#)

AMVETS Legislative Priorities

[H.R. 1715](#) Charitable Equity for Veterans Act of 2019 introduced by Rep. Ron Kind of WI and Rep. Brad Wenstrup of OH

[H.R. 1997](#) Veterans Posttraumatic Growth Act introduced by Rep. Tim Ryan of OH

[H.R. 3495](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. Jack Bergman of MI and Rep. Chrissy Houlahan of PA

[S. 1906](#) Improve Well-Being for Veterans Act introduced by Rep. John Boozman of AR

[H.R. 4154](#) Leave No Veteran Behind Act introduced by Rep. Susie Lee of NV and Rep. Steve Watkins of KS

[H.R. 3025](#) You Are Not Forgotten Act introduced by Rep. Mark Meadows of NC and Rep. Susie Lee of NV

Continued News

- After years of growth, [the number of people using the Post-9/11 GI Bill has now fallen substantially](#) for each of the past two fiscal years, federal data indicates. About 54,000 fewer people used the GI Bill in fiscal 2018 – a 7 percent decline from fiscal 2017, which was itself down about 7 percent from fiscal 2016's GI Bill enrollment total, according to data from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Officials from veterans service organizations and some of the schools that enroll the greatest numbers of GI Bill users said they're not overly concerned about the falling GI Bill usage – at least not yet. Experts offered several possible explanations for the declining enrollments, including more vets earning degrees, GI Bill rules that could be discouraging vets from using the benefit and the strong national economy. Regardless, the downward trend in Post-9/11 GI Bill usage is clear – and sharp. In addition to the enrollment losses, the amount of money spent of GI Bill benefits decreased by nearly \$287 million in fiscal 2018 to about \$4.6 billion, a 5.9 percent drop. Officials offered a variety of theories to explain the falling numbers.

- Getting Results in Transition, or better known as [GRIT](#), was developed in response to the growing concern about the rate of suicide among Veterans, especially during the transition from activity duty to civilian life. IBM designed the GRIT mobile solution to help service members, National Guard members, reservists, Veterans, care givers and their families gain personal insight into their emotional well-being. It provides resources to improve their individual situations, and serve as a tool to build resiliency and overall well-being. The first-use case incorporated into the GRIT app today is Employment, with a feature that provides personalized job matching.

- Researchers are beginning to [study whether beekeeping has therapeutic benefits](#). For now, there is little hard data, but veterans in programs like the one at the Manchester VA Medical Center in New Hampshire insist that it helps them focus, relax and become more productive. The programs are part of a small but growing effort by Veterans Affairs and veteran groups to promote the training of soldiers in

farming and other agricultural careers. While some of the programs are geared to giving soldiers the skills to become farmers and commercial beekeepers, others aim to address the challenges facing those returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq with brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues. The programs are careful to say that beekeeping is just one of several benefits that could help a troubled veteran. "The anecdotes we have heard are fantastic," said Alicia Semiatin, who heads the mental health program in Manchester. "Folks find that it is really something that they benefit from at the time they are doing the beekeeping and the benefits seem to be carrying over not only for days but weeks afterward. What more could you ask for from treatment than something to that degree?"

- [Opinion](#): Despite Trump's promises, access to VA mental healthcare remains elusive

- [Opinion](#): We need more than awareness to defeat the epidemic of veteran suicides



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